

Meta Ethical View of Existentialism: A Critique of Kantian Ethics

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Abstract— Existentialism, a twentieth century popular philosophical and literary movement, takes a distinctive stance towards ethics and value-theory. It clearly states that the possibility of authenticity is a mark of an individual's freedom. It is through freedom that existentialism approaches questions of value, leading to many of its most recognizable doctrines. But instead of normative ethics they make their arguments on the meta-ethical level which is based on freedom

Index Terms— Authenticity, Choice, Existentialism, Freedom, Kant, Meta-Ethics, Normative Ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

The deepest concern of existentialist *ethics* is perhaps to foster an authentic stance towards the human, groundless, values without which no project is possible. It is a concern that is expressed in the notions of *engagement* and *commitment*. The existentialists advocate that free commitment is ethical. As Sartre puts it in *Existentialism and Humanism*:

"One can choose anything, but only if it is upon the plane of free commitment."⁽¹⁾

Existentialism like Kantian ethics, evaluates the person as well as the act. To be a good existentialist is to recognize one's freedom of commitment and thus to take responsibility for whatever one does or is. As Simone De Beauvoir says:

"He bears responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well."⁽²⁾

Existentialist ethics ironically is oriented around the conception that there can be no ethics. This contradictory proclamation is based on the distinction of the two different senses of ethics i.e. normative ethics and meta-ethics. The existentialists do not propose a *normative ethics* instead they propound a *meta-ethics* which is based on human freedom. According to them, normative ethics provides us with concrete prescriptions and specific principles, instructing us what we ought to do. On the contrary, meta-ethics is the formulation of an ethical framework and the establishing of a logic and a discourse for delimiting the kinds of principles which are open to consideration and the kinds of arguments which are acceptable. Meta-ethics simply stated is literally talk about ethics. But it does not mean that meta-ethics is normatively unimportant. On the contrary, it is meta-ethical considerations which determine what our normative ethics will be like. Thus all the existentialists whether theist or atheist are involved in meta-ethics.

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Existentialist ethics is based on nihilism, often with the Nietzschean – Dostoevskian argument that 'if God is dead, then everything is permitted.' *Freedom* is the ontological heart of existentialism. And it is also its ethical foundation. There is no criterion of normative ethics which can be defended as 'correct'. But it is the principle of freedom which is defended as 'correct' on the meta-ethical level. In other words, what normative system of values one chooses is not open to judgement, but whether or not he chooses it in freedom is open to judgement. A man cannot, therefore, make a wrong choice of values, but he can make his choice wrongly. As Kierkegaard puts it 'it is not what you choose, but how you choose that is important.' This is the basis of modern existentialist ethics. As Simon De Beauvoir says:

"To will oneself moral and to will-one'self free are one and the same decision."⁽³⁾

Thus, existentialist ethics does not criticise another person's action. But it criticizes the way of choosing of the choices. As Sartre says in *Existentialism and Humanism*:

"People say to us 'you are unable to judge others'. This is true in one sense and false in another. It is true in this sense, that whenever a man chooses his purpose and his commitment in all clearness and in all sincerity, whatever that purpose may be it is possible for him to prefer another.... We can Judge nevertheless... that in certain cases choice is founded upon an error, and in others upon the truth. One can judge a man by saying that he deceives himself."⁽⁴⁾

Existentialism does not give us any instruction or a set of values guiding action for it is driven by a conviction to act in keeping with a choice made freely. Thus it refuses to lay down any prescriptions leading to any specific course of actions. However, this does not make the principle empty, for the ethical principle of freedom tells us not only that we are free, but that freedom has significance only when translated into an action that is born out of commitment. As Simon De Beauvoir observes:

"One of the chief objections leveled against existentialism is that the precept 'to will freedom' is only a hollow formula and offers no concrete content for action. But that is because one has begun by emptying the word freedom of its concrete meaning; we have already seen that freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man's project toward freedom is embodied in him in definite acts of behaviour."⁽⁵⁾

Existentialist ethics insists that a man is absolutely free both in his freedom from the causal determination of his intentions and decisions and in his freedom from 'outside authority' instructing him what course of actions are correct. The belief in freedom from causal determination has been a recurring theme in each existentialist, and their insistence upon freedom from authority is what sharply distinguishes them from Kant. Kant argues that men are causally free to choose

but not rationally free to choose their own values. Existentialism, however, teaches that there is no standard of correctness for one's choices. If reason is argued to be the ultimate justification of morality one is free to be 'irrational'. If God is posited as the ultimate source of all true values, one is free to be irreverent, if patriotism is taken as the ultimate duty, one is free to be treasonably undutiful; and if human nature is cited as support for a principle, one is free to act unnaturally. This is not to say, of course, that one is free from the consequences of his freedom to reject a value; the irreverent may still be damned, the treasonous may still be hanged, the 'unnatural' may become ill. One is always free to reject whatever values one chooses to reject, often with the understanding that his rejection will be met with disapproval or punishment from others.

The crux of the existentialist theory of value can be based expressed in saying that all that has any value is a man and his manner of choosing. Not only is it through man that values enter the world: ultimately, it is only man that is valuable.

All the existentialists whether theist or atheist are in their one ways ethical radicals. They are radical not only in the sense that they reject the Kantian idea of a 'foundation' for morality, but also in the sense that they reject in some way the content of Kant's bourgeois morality. In a strict sense existentialism is a nihilism that has no 'content', least of all 'contents' of morality, or other ethical codes. It can, however, attack and destroy the grounds upon which people base such codes. But it does not mean that existentialism is a purely destructive philosophy. On the contrary, existentialists themselves typically adopt a strong moral and radical stance. They differ from traditional moralists in their unwillingness to procure rational justifications in favour of ethics.

They have been highly critical of the philosophical and ethical traditions they inherited. Their views are as diverse as they are. They strive to offer an alternative to the overtly rational, and what they like to coin, an 'inhuman' philosophical approach. Their aim is to provide a better account of what it is to be a human being in this world. This task necessarily offers some ethical developments regarding our being-in-the-world as acting, encountering, socially living beings. They try to elaborate a viable alternative to traditional ethical view.

Existentialism has always been identified as the philosophy with the pessimistic view of man. But it is evident here that it is existentialism which places its highest confidence in humanity – that people will choose to be humane as well as human. They do not look at their 'nihilism' as a gateway to disaster. But all apparently believe that the freedom they seek will lead not to murder and chaos, but to artistic sensitivity, deeply felt religion, or new political and social conscience. Existentialism does not replace morality and humane values but places them on surer ground. To give up belief in 'morality' as a set of a priori or empirically practical principles is not to take the role of the 'fanatic'. It is to set aside invalid justifications and become moral for the right reasons – because one commits himself. Existentialism gives us perhaps the most optimistic view of man ever advanced in western philosophy: man will, without being ordered, instructed, forced by man or nature, choose to be humane. Sartre's 'existential hero' and Camus 'Absurd hero' are not madmen, and it is more than clear that Nietzsche's nihilist overman is not a Nazi prototype. The existentialists

may begin with Dostoevsky's concern, 'if there is no God, all is permitted,' but they soon leave Dostoevskian worries behind. Why should we suppose that man will do 'evil' if we remove the forces of authority of 'good'. Perhaps there is no reason, and the existentialists do not even argue the point. In every existentialist, there is the optimistic and almost simple-minded presupposition that man's freedom is desirable without qualification.

Each existentialist is 'radical'. Kierkegaard rejects traditional Christianity to replace it with his own notion of becoming 'becoming a Christian'. Nietzsche rejects the whole of Judeo-Christian morality to replace it with an ethic of 'self-realization'. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty became Marxists. In no case, however, is morality simply rejected, but reinterpreted in a personal and often more consistent way. Kierkegaard retains the moral side of Christianity, but makes personal commitment to God the defining work of his moral life. Nietzsche brutally degrades 'morality', which he says is 'immoral' but retains the moral virtues of courage, loyalty, integrity. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty place politics and revolutionary necessities above every day morality, but they do not simply reject morality out of hand. In each case, the existentialists reject the authority of 'morals' not to reject morality but to make it their own ethics. And where there is contradiction between their own morality and the old, the old morality is not simply dismissed, but necessarily recognized as an ever-present alternative choice:

"If I occupy myself in treating as absolute ends certain chosen persons, my wife, my son, my friends, the poor man I meet on my way, If I wear myself out in fulfilling my duties towards them, I shall have to pass in silence over the injustices of the age, the class-struggle, anti-Semitism, etc. and finally I shall have to profit from oppression to do good...But on the other hand, if I throw myself into a revolutionary enterprise, I take the risk of having no leisure for personal relations, and worse still of being brought by the logic of action to treat the greater part of men and even my comrades as means." ⁽⁶⁾

II. CONCLUSION

Existentialists unanimously accepted that an ethic of authenticity cannot be constructed a priori for it was their strongest conviction that authenticity manifests itself through the willing acceptance of the subjective pathos without the support of any rigorous ethical code. An individual should create his own ethical standard on meta-ethical level and must take the responsibility for his actions.

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